

# **The New Canadian Naturalist**

A thesis submitted to the College of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Art and Art History,  
University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon.

By Michael Farnan

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University of Saskatchewan  
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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my Supervisor Jennifer Crane for all her support and guidance, as well a big thanks to my committee members, Mary Longman and Keith Bell, and my external advisor Nancy Van Styvendale. I would also like to thank many of the faculty and staff from the Department of Art and Art History notably Lynne Bell, Len Findlay (English), Alison Norlen, Tim Nowlin, Peter Purdue, Lori Blondeau and Adrian Stimson for all their support, guidance and friendship. Thanks also to Sharilyn and Tracey in the office and Louise in the VRC for all their help over the last two years. To Barb Reimer and Patrick Bulas, I could not have done large parts of this project without you two! I am so grateful. Same goes to Jordan Poniatowski, Clark Ferguson, Greg Brown, James Lynne, Hugh Gilmour, Glen Hegland, Gord Vaadeland, Sean Peterson, Neil McKinnon, and my brothers Colin and Paul Farnan. I am indebted to so many people who have helped me with this project, either by performing, supporting, brain storming, or working on these ideas. I could not have done any of this project without all the support from my community! You all are so amazing!

I would also like to acknowledge and thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) for the award of a Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship and to the University of Saskatchewan College of Graduate Studies and Research for awarding me a University Graduate Scholarship. Together they made my studies possible.

I would also like to thank my family and friends who have contributed so much support, inspiration, and good times to my life; to you all I owe a debt of gratitude. And most importantly I would like to thank my brilliant and beautiful wife Jennifer LaChapelle for absolutely everything! And to our new little daughter Violet, thank you for always reminding me about what is important in this life.

## ABSTRACT

Michael Farnan's *The New Canadian Naturalist* project serves as an investigation into the construction of the wilderness/nature narrative in Canada through an exploration of romantic ideas of the sublime and iconic images of 'authentic' identity such as the cowboy, forestry labourer, the beaver, historic photos, educational tools, and toys and media/advertising stereotypes. Moreover, by taking a closer look at nationalized 'rites of passage' such as camping, tree planting, learning to canoe and even high school bush parties and the 'tribalism' found at large outdoor music and culture festivals, this exhibition and thesis paper serve as an interrogation into the often deployed trope of 'becoming animal' in Canadian cultural representation as an attempt to challenge some of the enduring colonial legacies of our settler past.

The *NCN* focuses on the narratives and ideologies championed by Canadian institutions such as our National Parks and museums representing dominant and 'official' histories. By engaging with the performance or staging of the particular moments and ideologies that take place within these culturally recognized spaces, the *NCN* becomes the embodied site for enactments of - and resistances to - these Canadian articulations of nature, gender, race, and nation. The history of representation *The New Canadian Naturalist* references is the familiarized and dominant Canadian ideology that says people can rediscover their authentic selves in rural and wilderness spaces.

This thesis paper supports an exhibition that includes large-scale painting and drawing, multi-channel video work, as well as a medium format photographic project. Two performance works, *The Beaver on the River*, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Power Animal Party, aka *the P.A.P. Smear*, will also take place in conjunction with the exhibition.

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**Figure 1.** *White Tail Brook*. 2011. Medium Format photo/Digital Print 36"x44"

## **An Introduction to the NCN**

The *New Canadian Naturalist* project builds upon my current practice and research interests to date which focus on our country's links to our natural environments and how that relationship informs our identity, histories and socio-cultural make-up. The work in this exhibition centers around the discourse of wilderness in Canada, and through my own personal geography, specifically focuses on adventures and ideas teased out of my time spent in Saskatchewan, British Columbia, and Ontario. In all cases, the images, ideas and research refer back to the founding moments of the Canadian nation in an attempt to better understand our present and possible futures. The work explores romantic ideas of the sublime; iconic images of masculinized identity

such as the cowboy and forestry labourer; the iconic beaver; historic photos; educational tools and toys; Hollywood/advertising stereotypes; and nationalized ‘rites of passage’ such as camping, tree planting, the summer cottage, etc. It is important to state from the outset that my work starts with two assumptions: that the lived practices of people and their interaction with the environment are crucial to understanding the social and political character of any particular issue; and that to be “Canadian” means that showing deference to the wilderness becomes an obligatory act and everyone must pass through this gate of the colonial past in order to be part of the future nation.

While the varied media presented within the *New Canadian Naturalist* may seem like it could create a diverse and disparate body of work, it draws upon, as a starting point, Canadian art history and early research I conducted while writing a now published article on tree planting artworks and their links to Canadian nationalism (see Ekers and Farnan, 2010). Working in a variety of media has allowed me multiple points of reference to create a reflective exhibition that I feel questions and perhaps challenges, among other things, the nature tourism narrative that has become synonymous with our Canadian Landscape experience and the broader theme of human interaction with our natural world. This work is also an attempt to address through humour, satire and a little violence, the working relationships and the inclusion/exclusion of local and historical narratives in this country as them-  
bodiment of the tensions between the iconic and the domestic nation. Although my work shown here is multi-media in nature, these concurrent themes of Canada’s socio-cultural make-up and the ever increasing commodification of nature run through all of my sculptural, painting, photographic, and video works.



**Figure 2.** *Shooting Guns with the Boys.*  
Medium Format photo/Digital Print 36"x44"



Initially I positioned the work I was creating for this show simply as a reaction to popular culture, contemporary artwork, and political and historical narratives. I wanted to focus on our country's links to nature and explore how that informs our identity. I began this project by looking at other artworks, histories (narratives), regionalism, etc. and expanded my research to include visual representations of "traditional Canadian rites of passage" such as resource labour culture (tree planting, fishing, mining, logging), national parks, camping, canoeing, nature tourism, "cottage countries", and included issues of environmentalism, northern development and current political and ecological concerns. As I went deeper into the project I found I also had to include a wide array of social theory, such as post-colonial studies, feminism, queer theory, the Indigenous humanities, and even a crash course on Neoliberal economics. The main question that I came into this project with and the question that still underlies my work and research is whether a concept of familiarity with the natural landscape can truly be attributed to a universal and generalized Canadian identity, and if so, where does this familiarity come from and who constructed this identity? This inquiry has, during the course of this project, expanded to include some of the more challenging questions around the continued consent of colonization in this country in an attempt to show that tyranny cannot rule on its own, that the dominant hegemony needs an accomplice too, which is all too often cultural representation. This history of representation I am referencing is what I feel to be a familiarized and dominant Canadian



**Figure 3.** *Heading Out.* Medium Format photo/  
Digital Print 36"x44"

ideology that says people can rediscover their authentic selves in rural and wilderness spaces. Ultimately, my aim with this work is to deconstruct some of the questions I have about the "state of the nation", as well as take a closer look at what I feel to be the continual trafficking by a new generation of artists in a distinctly traditional and as a result colonial

representation of the landscape. Through my own artwork and research, I hope to (re)examine what can best be described as Canada's master narrative by further exploring the urban versus rural, human versus nature ethos and the forces that keep the two separate by mediating our experience of the world we live in. With this in mind, my research necessarily focuses on how the production and consumption of a great deal of Canadian (and International) contemporary art, particularly landscape-based art, shapes the national imagination and retraces nationalist artistic and cultural practices from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. As a visual artist I am often surprised when other artists take on big issues and fail to build upon works from other artists that have come before them. For that reason I see my own research and visual art production as building upon the critical traditions of artists like N.E. Thing Co., Michael Snow, Joyce Wieland, Rodney Graham, Jeff Wall, Rebecca Belmore, Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan, Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptin, Lori Blondeau, Kent Monkman, Adrian Stimson, James Luna (I know he is American), Jin-Me Yoon and Gu Xiong among others. These artists inspire me as they disrupt the linkage between the sublime, romantic natural landscape and the nation by tackling issues of the everyday environment, forms of representation, mounting environmental and ecological changes, and issues of race, immigration and Canada's multicultural diversity. The effect of their work has been to render the asocial landscapes of influential Canadian artists like the Group of Seven as particular rather than universal. Furthermore, by taking a critical look at the treatment of the "other" in Canadian culture, these artists seriously challenge the presuppositions of Canadian identity (Ekers and Farnan, 2010).

Alongside my academic research, the body of work I have created for this exhibition includes large scale painting and drawing created to fit somewhere between commercial advertising design principles and the iconic and historic tradition of romantic, sublime landscape paintings. I have also included a medium format photographic project that explores ideas of fantasy versus reality by documenting various experiences in the Canadian landscape. Also included is a video project built around a group of animal characters I have created that is based on real and imagined Canadian histories, myths, stereotypes and popular culture fantasies. Two performance works, *The Beaver on the River* and the *3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Power Animal Party*, aka *the P.A.P. Smear*,

will take place in conjunction with this exhibition using the characters and story lines developed therein. These characters I inhabit, *The Beaver*, *Bison Hughy*, *Grey/Gay Owl*, and *Ass Face*, *Plastic Shaman to the Stars*, are intended to fit into a historical timeline and enable me to act out stories from our past using contemporary scenes of urban versus rural, man against nature conflicts and quarrels. These characters are loosely based on the Group of Seven, Grey Owl, white middle class kids playing at being labourers, bush/party culture and the subsequent “tribalism” found therein, as well as the lives of farmers, cowboys, naturalists and even drunk beavers loitering in bars. The characters in my gang represent a historical desire to interact with(in) a natural state

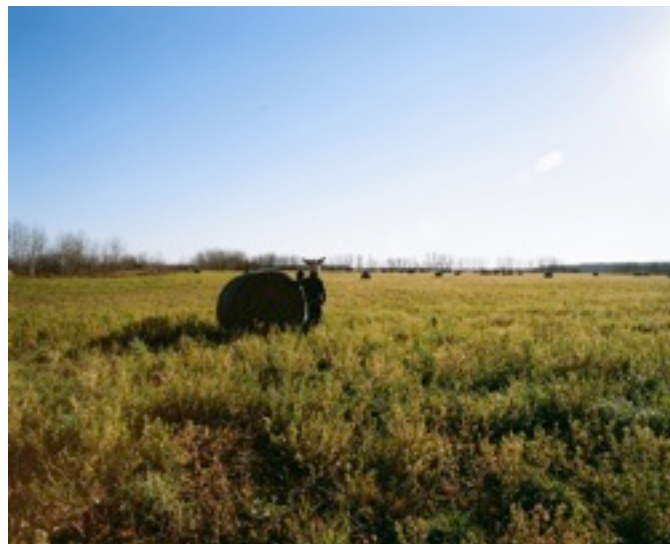


**Figure 4.** *The NCN at the WDM.* production shot from video shoot.

and recreate a nostalgic and iconic past. Most of all these artworks are meant to make us laugh. The initial idea behind the development of the characters was that through painted works, single channel video, photography, and public performance I would attempt to deconstruct the master narrative of history that has shaped this nation and produce a body of work that would, like most westerns, likely end in a giant bar fight. This is still almost the case, as through the course of the project many details, ideas and new works have infiltrated the dialogue I created for myself. As I feel it is important to base my current academic research and visual production on historical, so-

cial and ecological analysis and follow the simple principle that the lived practices of people and their interaction with the environment are crucial to understanding any particular issue, I have based most of this work off my own particular experiences and projected many of my ideas and fantasies onto those experiences of my very good-natured and generous friends. My ideas for this exhibition are heavily influenced by the didactic techniques encountered in museums of antiquity, art history and anthropology and I do reference their roles in shaping our history. I also feel strongly that my academic research is vitally important to the application of my ideas into the production of new artworks, and is significant in helping to achieve my goal to explore and challenge some of the restrictive and exclusive enduring features of Canadian nationalism, namely the urban versus rural ethos, whiteness, a denial of the colonial present, the negation of class, and a continued blindness to issues of gender and sexuality. More importantly, I am interested in how these issues can be disrupted by progressive artistic productions.

As mentioned earlier, being based in Saskatchewan has been quite influential and inspirational, and the proximity to local narratives has enabled me to focus on a couple of ideas. I came into the program knowing I would begin researching Grey Owl. I had already begun to think about a character based on his legacy and began to make a carved wooden mask for him. Grey Owl is admittedly a tough assignment. He is a questionable historical figure, still profoundly important to the National Parks narrative, definitely iconic, and at this point I am admittedly still not sure what to do with him. So I continued my research and began to work on other things. One such project was what I am calling for now *The Legend of Bison Hughy*, which is loosely based on a friend I know who was attacked by a Bison just outside the Prince Albert National Park. The character as he stands now, lives on the out-



**Figure 5.** *Bison Hughy. Bales and Bison.*  
Medium Format photo/Digital Print 36"x44"



skirts of the park and since his attack, has begun to think of himself as a Bison and is trying to interact with the herd that resides there. I realize now that I have begun to create my own Grey Owl character and am using the tools of myth, storytelling and representation to construct his identity. Interestingly, looking at Grey Owl and developing this bison narrative has brought me head on to the topic of National Parks in Canada. This is a fascinating area for me as it contains a great deal of my research interests within its history and continuing stewardship and conservation endeavors, and also offers a way into my interest in the colonial figure of Grey Owl and Canadians' ongoing relationship with the land we live in. As I delve deeper into this body of work, I



**Figure 6.** *The Legend of Bison Hughey.* Medium Format photo/Digital Print 36"x44"

realize it is the idea of an "authentic" Canada that I am questioning, and that through both our trophies and historical representations, I aim to explore the continuing popular discourse of a terra nullius- a continuing colonial framing of an empty landscape waiting to be filled. My work entails a viewing of history, through the present, and projects it into the future through re-enactment. Throughout this project I have tried to stay attentive to the terms of my critique, as it is so easy to get wrapped up in the threads pulled from various narratives. The idea to work on a

couple of subjects as a dialectical methodology has been quite helpful: to put something easily talked about next to something hard – the canonical. Ultimately, it is about trying to find a way in (and if I can’t find an easy way, I just send the beaver!). I have begun to think of the Bison project and Grey Owl this way. But the questions still remain. Where can this work go? Can Grey Owl speak of anything positive today – can there be a transcendence of his historical legacy? Does there need to be? Where do we go beyond the “mystification” of the idea, image, cultural ideology? Does talking back to the grand narrative also mean you are living in subordination and reaction to it? What about the idea that there is an alternate grand narrative? These are some of the ideas I am thinking about as I prepare this statement and work towards my exhibition.

### **Representing Wilderness: Power Animals, Plastic Shamans and the White Settler Narrative**

Generally speaking, my work involves an investigation into the construction of a



**Figure 7.** *The NCN at the WDM.* Production shot from video shoot.

wilderness/nature narrative and the enduring colonial legacies of the settler narrative that makes up Canada’s national identity. It is interesting that in this country, nature (as it is represented within National Parks) and settler history (as in Saskatchewan’s Western Development Museums for example) are set up as objects, to be held at a distance, and are often structured in a non-critical pedagogical framework. What is most interesting, however,

is that in order to achieve this stature there has to be a performance or staging of a particular moment or ideology. And it is within this setting that I try to position my work to enter and interrupt or disrupt the discourse. I try to use these spaces as art objects unto themselves and to construct and record a performance or a moment, fleeting or otherwise, that speaks back to the historical moment captured within those same parks and museums (like at the WDM with it’s “win-

ning the prairie gamble” narrative).<sup>1</sup> In my attempts to understand the narrative created by Parks Canada, I have become particularly intrigued by what Catriona Sandilands describes in her writings on the parks’ history as a “tension that remains in the parks between an iconic national nature (coded as wild, empty, cold, white, except for a romantic view of Aboriginal peoples and male-homosocial relationships and a domestic national nature (appearing as civil, secure, warm, infrastructurally complex and feminine/family oriented)” (Sandilands, 2005, p.145). I think this is an apt description of my experiences within the park system and can also be applied to Canada’s political and cultural history and its present in a more general sense.<sup>2</sup> The nature-culture juxtaposition in Canada, and in particular, as it is represented in contemporary art, is neither random nor wild and the physical bonds and spiritual connections we find there are strongly ideological. Nature (landscape) as defined by much of our current crop of Canadian artists can be seen much in the same way nature tourism sees Canada’s national parks. Both artist and consumer are using their work as a way to explore identity and self-expression through the vehicle of nature education.<sup>3</sup> Catriona Sandilands, in her text



**Figure 8.** *Working. Scott.* Medium Format photo/  
Digital Print 36”x44”

<sup>1</sup> *Winning the Prairie Gamble: The Saskatchewan Story* is the theme for new WDM exhibits in Moose Jaw, North Battleford, Saskatoon and Yorkton. The exhibits were created to celebrate the Saskatchewan Centennial in 2005, and aim to showcase the achievements and accomplishments of Saskatchewan's people, communities, and businesses. For information on the Western Development Museum see <http://www.wdmprairiegamble.com/>. Of interest and inspiration to this project are artists who speak back to these monuments to “official history”. One such artist is Adrian Stimson, whose photomontage piece, *Gambling the Prairie Winnings* (2005), engages this same colonial history through parody and satire to create a “centennial countermemory” (see Bell, 2007). Weblink to article: [http://www.canadianart.ca/art/features/2007/06/01/buffalo\\_boy/](http://www.canadianart.ca/art/features/2007/06/01/buffalo_boy/)

<sup>2</sup> To fully engage with Canada’s nature/culture discourse, issues of whiteness, the construction of a socialized nature, and post-colonial critique must also be considered. (among others, see Baldwin, 2009a, 2009b; Braun, 1997, 2003; Castree and Braun, 2001; Cronon, 1996; Ekers and Farnan, 2010; Erikson, 2002, 2010; Sandilands, 2000, 2005)

<sup>3</sup> To see this artist in nature/tourism relationship at play I highly recommend the recent National Parks centennial project film series: *The National Parks Project* (<http://nationalparksproject.grandportfolio.com/>). It is ideological, sweeping and nationalist, entertaining and troubling, beautiful and inspiring all at the same time.

"Domestic Politics: Multiculturalism, Wilderness and the Desire for Canada" speaks on this when she says, "[this framing] rearticulates an understanding of nation and nature within representational practices....National parks point to the fact that Canada has historically and to the present, found its identity both in regimes of federal citizenship and in the desires of international observers for a particular and naturalized Canada" (Sandilands, 2000, p.177).

One can see this current representation as a development of historical representations and nation building. Artists today are representing nature the way they were taught to. Nature has become spectacle. If we think of parks (which many do) as the 'preservation' of the land, and that the discourse around artwork representing jobs such as tree planting refers to it as a "reforestation project going on in the North for a newer, greener, tomorrow" (Alleti, 2005, p.32), then the proliferation and successful dissemination of these images keeps the national and global perspective that is "authentically" Canadian alive. In other words, the mass extraction going on

in our mythic wilds is sugar-coated and hidden under necessity and renewal. This gives us hope, for it tells us there are heroes at work in those endangered wilds, and as a result we are uncritical of the work that makes us feel that way. The representation of the worker, the emotions and the struggles contained within that romantic portrayal, fulfills the viewer's desire to be actively en-



**Figure 9.** *Logging Truck.* Medium Format photo/  
Digital Print 36"x44"



**Figure 10.** *Feller Buncher.* Medium Format photo/  
Digital Print 36"x44"



gaged in the narratives that make up this country. But by doing so, this work falls into the dominant hegemonic discourse as disseminated by the state authority and national heritage. Just as Sandilands describes her parks, Canada's vast wilderness is seen as a destination full of diverse, culturally-located itineraries that mark them as spaces of significance in a wide variety of discourses. The artwork sets itself up as eco-tourism, and just as it did for the Group of Seven, succeeds through our culture of leisure and the advent tourism plays into this middle class yearning to discover one's authentic self in Canada's rugged hinterlands. Canada and particularly our Art History are shaped around this back to nature, rugged wilderness, artist as backwoods hero, iden-

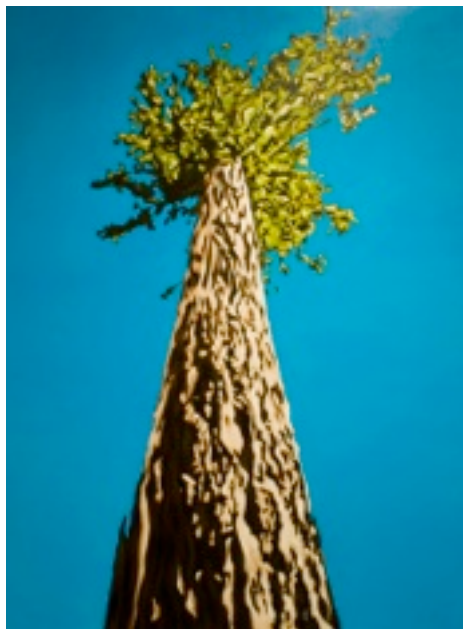


**Figure 11.** *The Beaver goes Logging.* Medium Format photo/Digital Print 36"x44"

tity. *The Beaver*, as a character in my work, is built off these ideas. He moves beyond the simply iconic and historical to challenge, through the notions of fantasy and reality, our very place in the space we call Canada. By playing at being one with nature, he asks by his very presence and actions and through the reactions of those he meets, who actually belongs in these spaces? *The Beaver* is here to confront the notion of the "other" in the Canadian landscape paradigm. Images

of *The Beaver* interacting with people in a tree planting camp, or of a man putting on the beaver suit to go logging, were always meant to challenge the idea that some things in Canada are positively represented while others are cast in a negative light. Logging, much like other resource-based jobs such as mining, large scale agriculture, and commercial fishing, to name just a few, is more often than not, represented within contemporary representational practices as a spectral presence of dead labour (Marx, 1977; Mitchell, 2000). In the case of logging, it is most often shown in contrast between images of clear-cuts and idealized representations of wilderness (see Ekers and Farnan, 2010). In contrast, jobs like tree planting or other conservation-based projects (even Ducks Unlimited, a group dedicated to saving wetlands for the purpose of preserving hunting grounds) are framed around a discourse of necessity and renewal, and therefore framed as positive elements within the wilderness discourse. I think what needs to be made clear in this discussion is that there is no black and white, right or wrong answer to these questions around our continual habitation, extraction and use of our natural resources. What is clear, however, is that the dialogue needs to be open and honest and continuous.

Unfortunately and somewhat ironically, the use of “rites of passage” activities as a platform for the middle class utopic vision of discovery and renewal negates this. The playing at



**Figure 12.** *The General*.  
Oil on Canvas. 84"x66"

labour, the playing at being one with the elements, of going “tribal” and “becoming animal” becomes for most (and one could argue specifically for the artists involved in this practice) about the stories and pictures one can tell once safely back in the urban cocoon. Images about jobs, hiking experiences, and landscapes explored become souvenirs about the things one did to become strong. It also gives us a taste of the old days. Man in nature as he once was. Historic man from a golden age, like the cowboy or logger. All of the images in these works about Nature and their unbiased support in the pop culture lexicon serve to conform to a globally mediated and, I should add, privi-

leged aesthetic sensibility. These images mirror Canada's national identity and coherent national story and future (Sandilands, 2000). Everyone knows we are logging our wilds, mining our resources, abusing water and agricultural reserves, and yet most Canadians are led to believe the country is full of a vast pristine wilderness. Images of renewal and character building, sitting next to images of parks and pre-packaged identity, let us know we are still that nation. It gives us balance and a very false sense of security. With political and ecological discourse currently surrounding concepts like our carbon footprint, and with countries and their citizens attempting to be carbon neutral through carbon credit trading and such, is it any surprise that a new awareness and national discourse would find itself focusing on Nature and Wilderness? Unfortunately in Canada, there seems to be a disconnect between our lived and represented history, geography, and culture. Canada as a nation relies, for its hegemonic universality, on its ability to form a narrative of geographic and cultural sovereignty that authentically embodies the collective identity of its citizens. We are a northern nation, full of rugged individualists. Quoting Cate Sandilands one more time: "For this authenticity, the nation looks to the past as a representation of origins and shared culture, and to the future as a fulfillment of this originary promise, to take us past contemporary irruptions of difference" (2000, p.170). Therefore, the desire for the nationalist past (and future) disavows the differentiae of culture, community and identity. As Sandilands says, there is a nationalizing of the imagination.

Much of my current artwork has been created to wrestle with the problems that lie within this kind of discourse. *Ass Face, Plastic Shaman to the Stars* and his *Power Animal Parties* for example, confront the legacy created by Joseph Beuys in Western Art, which seems to have made it okay for artists to appropriate Indigenous culture, in particular to dress up as Shamans. This Shaman work, such as *I love America, She loves me*, 1974, in which Beuys spent three days in a gallery with a live coyote, has been written about extensively (Borer, 1997; Ray, 2001; Zwirner and Wirth, 2007). Interpretation really depends on the viewer, and their vantage point. I interpret the work as a form of taxidermy, as it "spins a nostalgic narrative of disappearance that accepts the decline of animal and Aboriginal populations as a melancholy but natural fact of social

progress” (Wakeham, 2008, p.20)<sup>4</sup>. This legacy, sincere or not, and Beuys’ attempt to reconcile the imperial and colonial project taking place in the “New World” with works such as the coyote performance has had a profound impact on an entire generation of artists. Some of that impact I think should be questioned. In Canada, we see many non- Indigenous artists appropriating the Shaman role; A.A. Bronson is one such famous example, who in the discourse around his exhibition *School for Young Shamans* (2008) is noted as referring to Beuys as the patron saint of shamans in the art world; as well as indirectly groups like the Fastwurms, Twelve Point Buck, The Royal Art Lodge, not to mention Emily Carr or even Jack Shadbolt, all whom incorporate pedagogical elements of understanding our place in nature with ephemera and ‘kitsch’ that rely heavily on a colonial relationship with the spiritual relationships to animals found in nature religions and Indigenous culture. Moreover, in Canada we also import Shaman artists as influential role models. Marcus Coates from Britain is the most prominent, I would think, as he has received critical success here in Canada, having taken part in a residency in Banff as well as being a feature artist at this past summer’s blockbuster show at the Power Plant in Toronto called *Adaptation, Between Species*, which was about “becoming animal”<sup>5</sup> The question that springs to my mind is, what culture are artists like Coates, Bronson, and Beuys referencing? Reading the curatorial statement of the Power Plant show by Helena Reckitt (2010), we see that she is heavily influenced by the Wicca-inspired artists Fastwurms, as well as by the European philosophy and theories of Derrida and more importantly Deleuze and Guattari’s treatises on “becoming animal” (Derrida, 2002; Deleuze and Guattari, 1988). Why this is significant, and most definitely the topic of further research, is that whether these authors are read as a critique of capitalist consumer culture, and as catalysts for change, communion, and extension of human identity (they

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<sup>4</sup> It becomes a fascinating study to (re)examine much of western art practice involving the representation of nature and animal through the semiotics of taxidermy as argued by Pauline Wakeham in her incisive book, *Taxidermic Signs. Reconstructing Aboriginality*, 2008, which gives a genealogical and representational analysis of taxidermy’s historical development as a sign system, concept and material practice.

<sup>5</sup> Exploring encounters and exchanges between the species – The Power Plant’s summer 2010 group show *Adaptation* highlights forms of identification and projection, mimicry and camouflage. The exhibition looks at anthropomorphic projections of animals, and at the ways in which animals interact with humans, including how they ‘train’ their masters. The difference between intelligence and instinct, and forms of knowledge of certain species, are explored in the process. It also considers the lure of non-human states, including the urge to merge with the creaturely and the botanical. Artists: Francis Alÿs, Cory Arcangel, John Bock, Olaf Breuning, Marcus Coates, Robyn Cumming, FASTWÜRMS, Shaun Gladwell, Lucy Gunning, Nina Katchadourian, Hanna Liden, Hew Locke, Sandra Meigs, Rivane Neuenschwander, Jeff Sonhouse, and Javier Téllez. (from Power Plant website, 2010)

are read this way)<sup>6</sup>, they still rely heavily on the notion of the “primitive”, and while they do not advocate a “return to nature”, they are dependent on an original and pristine state of nature that is somehow absent in the contemporary sense. Read this way, they still traffic in the colonial and imperial language of transgression.



**Figure 13** .308. Medium Format photo/Digital Print 36”x44”

To gain a better vantage point on what is at stake in the Canadian Wilderness debate, I think it is important to take a closer look at an artist like Marcus Coates and compare him to an artist such as Adrian Stimson, a Canadian Aboriginal artist working in a similar fashion. In Coates’ early works he attempts to put himself in the position of animal in an apparent attempt to reconcile his relationship to nature and his desire to become animal. Coates’ “cultural mediations of becoming animal [included] particular members of society- shamans”, who he describes as having “access to a whole other area of knowledge and experience, and who [unselfishly] work on behalf of their communities” (Coates, 2010). Coates, like we must assume Beuys and Bronson also did, read up on shamans, in this case Siberian shamans, their procedures and protocol and took a “quick weekend course in Notting Hill Gate”, which he describes as “very new-agey and very self-help”. The result was the film *Journey to the Lower World*, 2004, in which he performs a shamanic ritual for residents of a Liverpool tower block scheduled for demolition. Wearing his deerskin robe complete with head and antlers, Coates communes with his animal spirits to help the residents discover if they have any help and protection for their current predicament from the animal world. The film is quite interesting and funny as the focus goes back and forth between Coates and the audience, which is caught somewhere between “skepticism and belief, spoof and sincerity”. He is surprised

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<sup>6</sup> see Calarco and Atterton, eds, 2004; Baker, 2000; Walters, 2010.



to discover afterwards that some of the audience seems to truly believe in his performance and is surprised by his own reaction to an experience that "felt really magical and quite transformational" (Coates, 2010). Observing that "perhaps there is a future in this shaman thing", Coates begins to see that "maybe this could have quite an interesting role in society... perhaps I am able to do it...I thought anyone is able to do it really, but just no one does do it. Maybe the artist is actually quite a powerful person in society" (Coates interview, 2010). And so began his shamanic career, which brought him among other places to Norway to try and stop the trafficking of Nigerian women in to the sex trade, and to Israel to try and help with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. "In a lot of these rituals, my ignorance doesn't really matter. In lots of them it feels like an advantage" (Coates, 2010). It is important for Coates to be authentic and believable



**Figure 14.** *A man, a saw and a mask.* Medium Format photo/  
Digital Print 36"x44"

and he stresses the role of the imagination in reaching conclusions to society's problems. He sees the humour and absurdity of his performances as helping do this from a totally non-rational position of losing control within the ritual. "Shamanic work uses a given cultural format, there is a cultural language there, a cultural history I borrowed and reinterpreted and made my own, and made it contemporary. This sort of cultural filter, or cultural precedent interests me" (Coates, 2010). But whose culture and what precedent is he really referencing and what are his motivations? He sites Siberian shamans, as do writers comparing his work to Beuys' (Walters, 2010), as his principle reference for his rituals, but later in the interview describes recently spending some time in Ecuador "with quite a remote tribe in the Amazon jungle". His descriptions of the tribe's daily lives and relationship to the land they live in become his motivation for his own ritual performances. He describes a "motivation to go back to that point", born out of "frustration I think, but also an inquiry". As if suddenly realizing that motivation, he excitedly exclaims, "it's

exactly the same, I am exactly the same as that caveman, and incredibly different, and it is reconciling those two things and how powerful culture is to give the appearance of difference” (Coates, 2010). And I say, pardon? Did he really call Indigenous Ecuadorians “cavemen”? Here is where the problems of Beuys’ Guattari and Deuluzian-inspired spiritual/cultural journey and Coates’ blatant cultural appropriation rear their ugly head. Beuys’ Fluxus-based manifesto for “social sculpture” and the influence that has had on artists like Coates, Bronson, and a host of others is, when projected onto the “becoming animal” narrative, just another example of European imperialism and colonial thinking. Coates’ cultural appropriation is in the tradition of the British Naturalist and his impulse to chart, explore, understand, interpret, and recreate has direct parallels to the historic conquest and expansion of Imperial Britain in this country and beyond. In fact, his cited three strategies of working – scientific, anthropological, and performative (his trying to become animal) – reek of romantic primitivism, which Coates thankfully acknowledges in the interview. But for Coates, “the ritual and performance is secondary. It’s about them [the audience], not me.” His desired results: “to embarrass people into talking to each other... to find relevance for the artist, for myself, and for some relevance for my relationship to nature” (2010). The inconsistencies of this position and statement aside, it is the act of becoming animal and anthropomorphism, described by Coates as the projection of human sentiment on another species, that are his true motivation for the appropriation of Indigenous culture, transformation and alchemy. “I am taking some of these mythological things quite seriously and these processes quite



**Figure 15.** *The Beaver getting thrown out of the Power Animal Party*  
Production still from video.

seriously...[like the idea] of our mundane contemporary culture becoming transformed into a mythological and magical arena for things, it’s almost like creating a new mythology, a new mythology for nature” (2010).

The problem behind this all too often used trope of ‘becoming animal’ and the subsequent privi-

leging and empowerment found within the symbolic use of nature is that for many artists, young and old, looking to nature and the past is nothing more than a romantic lament for an earlier, unspoiled time. This romantic and anthropomorphic appropriation of nature religions and Indigenous mythologies harkens back to a better way in which the subject can emerge transformed and enlightened. Thus “becoming animal”, as used by many Canadians as a way to position the question of identity, begins to symbolize the freedom of an alternate community, one outside the rapidly growing urban culture we find ourselves living in and one that enables us to connect to the collective myth of the untamed Canadian wilderness that is so central to our Canadian identity. Following alongside traditionally white Canadian rites of passage such as the Boy Scouts and Girl Guides, Summer Camp, family weekend camping trips, tree planting, and even high school bush parties and large outdoor music and culture festivals, the representational act of “becoming animal” provides a closed place, set apart, protected and privileged. It comes with a different set of rules and styles for life inside its protective cover where all the traditional rules need not apply. The problem with this process is that when presented within the enduring colonial discourse seen in much Canadian art, whether intended or otherwise, there is a promotion of a naïve ‘primitivism’ in which the artist and viewer are invited to cast off history and inhibition, in order to celebrate a return to a pristine state of nature unfettered by politics and history. We see this time and time again in Canadian art. The latest example would be the *Adaptation* show, which links the primitivism of becoming animal to an emotional release, not only from the perceived alienations of urban life, but also to an escape from whiteness through “choosing to adopt (and by implication, at any time choos[ing] to discard), the ways of the ‘tribal’, the ‘natural’, and the ‘less sophisticated’ peoples on Earth” (Ekers, 2010, p.79). Given this problematic line of thinking, it is evident still that the dominating discourse around wilderness and finding a connection to place and space here in Canada necessarily involves the emulation and romanticization of Indigenous culture. In North America we are overrun with “spiritually-driven people, who alienated from their own heritage, immerse themselves into adopted cultures of apparent balance and wholeness” (Miller, 2011). The problem with these ‘primitivists’ is that through the transformational process of a rejuvenated sense of self, a “regeneration of whiteness is achieved through an individual ‘going tribal’ and afterwards returning to their normal life a more complete and whole



person. In this respect, primitivists tend to reinforce [the idea of] white superiority even as the individuals ‘go native’” (Ekers, 2010, p.80). It should also be noted that primitivism is almost always connected to a spatial imaginary of the colonial frontier (see Ekers, 2010; Braun, 2003). The only redemption that can be found within this practice of becoming animal and modern-primitivism is in its failure (eg. Coates’ shamanic performance) to create a new mythology for nature, for it is this failed act that can bring the work to the level of metaphor. This failure becomes all the more glaring when comparing Coates’ work to that of Adrian Stimson, a Saskatoon-based artist and member of the Siksika First Nation in Alberta who, like Coates, uses “multi sensory environments [which] makes it impossible for viewers to decide whether we are witnessing the fictional, the dreamt, the fantastical, the invented, or the effects of ‘realness’ in oblique self (and collective) portraiture” (Bell, 2009, p.84). And like Coates, Stimson “creates moments of provocative dissonance that rely on the viewer to complete the meaning of the works as an active participant” (2009, p.87). Stimson is a multidisciplinary artist who has created quite a powerful body of visual work. His installation and performance work exploring both his and other Aboriginal Canadians’ history in the Residential School systems is hard to forget. His works *Old Sun* (2008) and *Buffalo Boy’s Confessional: Indulgence* (2007) quickly affirmed Stimson’s place as one of Canada’s most important artists. One of his most famous pieces is the outrageous performance character *Buffalo Boy*, inspired by the performance legacy and colonial themes in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West shows of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. *Buffalo Boy* is a camp send-up of the darker sides of Canadian history (Bell, 2007). Without going extensively into Stimson’s oeuvre (for this see Bell, 2007, 2009), I bring him into the conversation at this point because I see a correlation between the motivations of these two artists as they both, from very different viewpoints and for very different reasons, embrace and appropriate the notion of “The Imaginary Indian” (Francis, 1992). Stimson adopts and challenges the romantic and benevolent view of Indigenous history in the Canadian nation-building project and destabilizes our historic connection to place. “[Stimson] sets out to Indigenize and Queer the terrain of the national imaginary” (Bell, 2009, p.85), while Coates, with his naive appropriation of Indigenous culture and ongoing search for belonging, unwittingly reinforces the colonial terrain of that same national imaginary. I imagine at this point you might guess where I am going with this critique. It is after seeing the

work of Coates and the show at the Power Plant, while researching the ideas of “becoming animal” and cultural appropriation, and juxtaposing that with my own experiences of white Canadian kids going “native” in the bush<sup>7</sup>, that *Ass Face*, *Plastic Shaman to the Stars*, and his *Power Animal Parties* were born. *Ass Face* nicely portrays this inherent colonial legacy within the universality of a generalized Canadian identity. The tension he causes is deliberate, as it begs the



**Figure 16.** *Into the Forest*. Drawing, mixed media. 108”x144”

question of whether my motives are any different than those I question. Again, I’ll leave that to interpretation. This work has caused laughter and anger and I suppose this is why I will continue to try and make work like this, work that deliberately problematizes our knowledge and our power through parody and a playful, ironic imitation-with-difference in an attempt to remind us of our own fallibility.

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<sup>7</sup> Without getting into specifics or naming individuals, I will just quickly note that I have had several friends, who apparently seduced by the hedonistic elements found within rave culture and utopian party festivals such as Burning Man and Shambhala have embraced a “modern primitive” lifestyle and changed their names to include their “power animals”.

In his book *The Imaginary Indian*, 1992, Daniel Francis describes “plastic shamans” as “people who appropriate an Indian persona and claim to have special insight into the Indian way of life. The [shaman] speaks with great authority and achieves wide recognition. They are accepted so easily because they conform to the image of the Indian held by the White world” (p.109). *Assface*, *Grey/Gay Owl*, *Bison Hughy*, and to somewhat of a lesser extent, the *Beaver* were created to personify and interrogate the traits of the “Imaginary Indian”. I feel that somewhere within this failed shaman-becoming-animal metaphor, we can actually find some redeeming qualities. Seeing Marcus Coates in action reminded me of that legendary character and one of the most infamous “Imaginary Indians” in Canadian history: Grey Owl. Grey Owl’s real name was Archie Belaney. He was an English immigrant with no First Nations ancestry who adopted a Native persona to help sell his books and spread his message of ecology and stewardship of the Canadian forests. Grey Owl was hired in 1931 by the Parks Branch of the Federal Government to be “caretaker of park animals” at Riding Mountain National Park in Manitoba and later in Saskatchewan at Prince Albert National Park (Francis, 1992). Grey Owl’s message of ecology was (and apparently still is) quite inspiring to a great many Canadians and was all the more profound because people thought it came from the ‘authentic’ voice of an Indian. “After



**Figure 17.** *Bison*. Oil on Canvas. 84”x66”

Grey Owl’s death, and the revelation of his true identity, it soon became clear that no one much cared. The general opinion seemed to be that what he stood for was more important than who he was – and this being the case, so what if he wasn’t really an Indian? What mattered was his work as a writer and as a tireless promoter of wilderness preservation. As for the rest, it seemed a harmless enough hoax” (Francis, p.137). What is interesting to note is that while Coates’ (and *Ass Face*’s) ‘failed’ shamanic work is ultimately about trying to find a connection and similarity to the animals in their environments, their failed attempts to try and make sense of the

community and the world around them by appropriating the Indigenous image of the shaman actually strengthen the validity of this search by opening up a dialogue on what is actually missing. Coates' disconnection to his own culture's historical legacy, which created this yearning, is then countered by Stimson, who through performance and an exploration of how that same colonial culture removed him and his family from their natural environment teaches us that through understanding, we can all naturally embody this connection to place and nature. And while Coates' search for the connection to the animal kingdom is indeed sincere, Stimson shows us how the connection can be real.

I use the bison as a symbol representing the destruction of the Aboriginal ways of life. But it also represents survival and cultural regeneration. The bison is central to Blackfoot being. The bison as Icon and food source, as well as the whole history of its disappearance, is very much a part of my contemporary life.  
(Stimson as quoted by Bell, 2004, p.48)

Stimson's performances and installation work connect "the cultural genocide inflicted on Indigenous children in the Residential School system and the Buffalo genocide and its devastating impact on the lifestyles of the Indigenous peoples of the Plains" (Bell, 2009, p.89). It is interesting that when Coates falls back on his natural(ist) tendencies to genuinely understand his local environment (*Dawn Chorus*, 2007)<sup>8</sup>, his work enters into the realm of the profound and we can see that connection take place quite naturally. This does not mean that artists must stay within their own cultural safety zones, but I do think it illustrates that truly great art comes from a place of honesty and personal geography. And so, if one takes the time to hear it, there is a very interesting and profound conversation that takes place between artists like Marcus Coates and Adrian Stimson, one that redeems the missteps and blunders on both sides of the fence. This conversation includes the urban and rural and the desire to connect to place, a desire for the 'authentic' moments. But in Britain that desire seems to necessarily lead back to its history of

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<sup>8</sup> Marcus Coates' *Dawn Chorus* (2007) is a multi-screen video and audio installation that shows people in various personalized locations (living rooms, bathtubs, bedrooms, etc) intermittently breaking into bird song. Coates made the piece with the help of biologists and British naturalist and field recorder Jeff Sample by recording 14 different birds in a dawn chorus of birdsong in one of England's protected forests. He then slowed each song down, taught his singer/actors to mimic the slowed down version, video taped it and then sped up the footage to avian pitch, roughly 20 times faster. Although I have only seen video documentation of the installation, it is really quite a powerful and surprising piece.



colonial expansion and a scientific/naturalist understanding of the world, while here in Canada the move from urban to rural, to ‘authentic’ moments in the landscape, necessarily needs to focus a critical eye on whose land and whose history it is that we are exploring. As Lynne Bell says, in Canada we need to suspect our settler histories and it’s



**Figure 18.** *Glen and Jeepers*. Medium Format photo/Digital Print 36”x44”

centennial discourses of modernity, progress, and development (2009, p.90). Interestingly, although this voice was absent from the *Adaptation* show in Toronto, it is the realization that the desire “to become animal” cannot take place without the voice that challenges this colonial disavowal.

***I might not be right, but I do know when you are wrong:***

### **The Canoe, Gay Owls, Iconic Canada and the Construction of Place**

So if a reinterpretation of colonial identity and ideology can reverse the colonial strategy of territorial take-over (Said, 1978), then perhaps we need to critically examine our icons, heroes, places and spaces of importance. To do this I have focused on the Naturalist explorer tradition in Canadian colonial history. For this exhibition, I have focused on The Beaver, The Bison, The Tree, and The Canoe. The characters are directly linked with each other through historical settlement and, in some bizarre and abstracted way, by my fascination with the character of Grey Owl. As mentioned in this paper, Grey Owl’s historical legacy is still very important and relevant to the ongoing ecological and conservation-based discourses surrounding the Canadian wil-

derness. My inclusion of the Grey Owl character in this exhibition through the painting *Grey/Gay Owl*<sup>9</sup>, and as a more spectral presence within the video works, combined with his renaming to *Gay Owl*, might seem ambiguous and even opportunistic. Certainly the ease of the play on words from Grey to Gay could be and has been perceived as such. But there is more at stake within the renaming of the Grey Owl character. As other artists, social historians, and cultural



**Figure 19.** *Grey/Gay Owl*. Oil on Canvas. 36"x48"

theorist have shown, the Canadian wilderness is without a doubt, a heavily gendered, heterosexual and masculinized space. But as Erickson and Sandilands point out in their introduction to *Queer Ecologies, Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, 2010, there is within this space an opportunity to create an “interesting subversion of the dominant discourses that attach wilderness spaces to performances of heterosexual masculinity” (2010, p.3). *Grey/Gay Owl*’s role within the *New Canadian Naturalist* is to show how the nationalism of wilderness was not only formed around racial lines, but that it also contains a charged history of sexuality, gender division and a

modern anxiety surrounding effeminate masculinities (see Ekers, 2010; Erickson, 2010; Sandilands, 2005). The character of *Grey/Gay Owl* is shaped and influenced by these historically legitimated narratives of sexuality and frontier masculinity and their concomitant effect on understandings of civility, tolerance and acceptable difference. Coupled with the role Archie Belaney/

<sup>9</sup> The written title of the painting *Grey/Gay Owl* in this text appears slightly different in a gallery context. *Grey Owl* will be in typed italic text and have the 'rey' crossed out and 'ay' written above it in ink.

Grey Owl played within the settlement and stewardship of the Prince Albert National Park is the changing use of the term 'gay' in Canadian culture and what the implications of that usage can mean. Together with the traditionally masculine heroic jobs and exploits in Canada's wilds (logging, mining, ranching, being a park warden, etc.), the postwar rise of family camping has contributed greatly to the heterosexualization of Canada's wilderness areas, which have come to be organized and understood as spaces of hetero-masculinity (see Ekers, 2010). For this reason, it is not uncommon to still hear activities and actions that counter this ideal being described negatively as 'gay', meaning effeminate or bad. Below I have included two rather lengthy quotes to describe this essential part of my character *Grey/Gay Owl*. The first is from a chapter in Michael Ekers' recent PhD dissertation, *Working the Landscape* (2010), entitled, '*Just Fuck that Hole*': *Sexualizing Labour, Nature and Nation* (2010, Chapter 6, pp. 216-253); while the second is from a 1947 Public School text entitled *Gay Adventurers*. This school text was reprinted in consecutive years up until 1963. Of interest is a stamp from the King George School of the Kenora Public School Board, Kenora, Ontario on the inside cover. From Ekers and a series of interviews he did on life in tree planting camps in British Columbia (2010, p.238):

When political correctness is lifted a true heterosexual and heterosexist social order is allowed to flourish. In Isaac's opinion, tree planting is a presumptive heterosexual social environment: 'A homosexual person' (which is presumed to be a gay man in Isaac's reflections) does not fit within the masculinist heterosexual matrix of desire and cannot participate in the sexual objectification of women. Isaac's reflection were far from the exception. Frank, upon being asked to reflect on the homophobic slurs that circulated on his crew, remarked "it may seem harsh but it's kind of, we do live in more of a hetero world. Not everyone is politically correct and educated that way" (Frank, Tree Top, crew boss, 2007). While seemingly aware that homophobia may be a problem on his crew, he was an apologist suggesting that the homophobic crew culture was a reflection of the broader heteronormative world.

Alongside of the heteronormative and heterosexist remarks, several workers were critically aware of the heteronormativity and homophobia of tree planting. Speaking critically, Brent, a planter from Tree Top, commented on this aspect of planting as follows:

It doesn't require any stretch of the imagination to figure out why bad things are referred to as gay out here. Just think of sexual stereotypes, like homosexuality, especially in males, is generally effeminate and emasculated, to a certain extent, all these qualities are essentially the exact opposite of what is rewarded out here.

(Brent, Tree Top, first year planter, 2007)

As Brent suggests, tree planting culture valorises a series of traits traditionally associated with a virile norm of masculinity – being strong, tough and hard (see Cronon 1996; Erickson 2002; Simon 2003; Sandilands 2005; Ekers 2009). The use of the word gay in tree planting camps reifies gay men as effete and emasculated and operates through a contrasting celebration of virile heterosexual norms of masculinity.

And from the introduction to *Gay Adventurers*, the 1946-67 Canadian studies reader from Kenora, Ontario:

#### Gay Adventurers

Only the Indians and Eskimos lived in Canada before the forefathers of the rest of our people came from other countries across the seas. The French came first. They have been here a long time. Then the British came. Then came a stream of people from other countries, Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Holland, Germany, Russia, Greece, Italy and many, many more.

All these people had heard that Canada was a fine country. They came here to live and work and make their homes. They and their children make up the Canadian Nation.

Now every person has a gift that his country can use. Perhaps you do not know yet what your gift will be but you will find out some day. Then you will be glad to add it to those given by other Canadians.

All those brave and gay adventurers who came to Canada long ago brought gifts with them. All the new people who came here every year add their gifts. All of us putting our gifts in together is what makes Canada rich and great.

As you read this book you will find out what some of these gifts are. In each chapter you will read about gifts of different kinds. Watch for them and think what each kind does for our country and its people.

The above quotes show us that issues of gender, patriarchy, racism, and sexuality play, both in the past and present, an inherent and pervasive role within the romanticized and still ideologically colonial Canadian wilderness experience. The systems of repressive tolerance and acceptable prejudice that are still in place in Canada need to be combated, and so it is in the spirit of Monty Python's *The Lumberjack Song* (1969), Kids in the Hall's *Running Faggot* (1989), and the National Parks' continued emphasis on family camping, that our hero *Grey/Gay Owl* asks the imperative question of whether or not it is okay or even unexceptional to 'come out' in Canada's hinterlands. He also necessarily poses the perhaps more pertinent question of whether it is permissible for white, straight, male artists in Canada to talk about gender, race, and sexuality. I will add that the *Gay Adventurers* book has provided me with one other quoted source. In my video





**Figure 20.** *Red Canoe*. Oil on Canvas. 84"x66"

shot at the Western Development Museum in North Battleford, Saskatchewan, the scouts read aloud a poem entitled "Salute To The Trees," right before they beat up *The Beaver*. The poem was written by Henry Van Dyke in 1922 and describes the gifts trees have given to man.

Drawing upon historic, documentary and educational text-based works to inspire the creation of new artwork is something I have practiced for a long time. I also draw upon the histories of iconic Canadian symbols to fashion narratives behind my work. One such symbol is the Canoe with its direct links to the past, and while the canoe has a history in many Indigenous cultures around the world, nowhere does it have such strong links and cultural endurance to the creation of the nation-state as it does here in Canada (see Erickson, 2010; Jennings, 1999, 2002a, 2002b; Hodgins, 1999; Henderson, 1998). For a quick review of the canoe's history in Canada, I will rely on Bruce Erickson's brilliant and incisive essay "*fucking close to water*": *Queering the production of the nation* (2010), which connects the canoe and its appropriation into mainstream

“leisured culture” with “nature loving” as a tool of bio-power<sup>10</sup> in Canada and a direct instrument of colonial expression and the cultural assimilation of Canada’s First Nations population. Erickson unravels the canoe’s links to European settlement and destabilizes the canoe as a cultural icon and in doing so questions and ‘queers’ the myth of the canoe as a celebrated symbol of the Canadian landscape. Much of the literature surrounding the canoe in Canada and the nation’s Aboriginal origins for the modern nation state (see Ralston Saul, 2009; Bordo, 1992) points to the canoe’s importance in opening up new lands to European exploration and settlement. In the kindest and gentlest versions of this history, the canoe was a gift to early French settlers who then used it as the necessary vessel in which to travel the waterways of the otherwise unmanageable Canadian terrain. This early French diplomacy created a unique social dynamic that many authors and historians describe as one of the earliest versions of multiculturalism (Jennings, 2002; Ralston Saul, 2009). Of course, depending on whose history one reads after this early version of diplomacy, the English settlers either adopted this French style of acceptance of Native culture and built a prosperous nation (Jennings, 2002, *and most of Canada’s history textbooks*) or turned it upside down through a systematic and thorough policy of cultural assimilation and attempted racial genocide (Ralston Saul, 2009; Erickson, 2010; Bannerji, 2000; Longman, 2006, 2011).

As Erickson points out in his essay, the predominant viewpoint in Canada and the official government assertion of “racial and ethnic harmony and cross-cultural understanding” (note Erickson quotes here from this Canadian Government website:

[http://www.pch.gc.ca/progs/multi/inclusive\\_e.cfm](http://www.pch.gc.ca/progs/multi/inclusive_e.cfm), which is currently out of date) is also “the assertion that the relations between French, English and First Nations Peoples in what was to become Canada were indicative of the nation that was to be [and] works as a normalizing power in two ways. First, it relates a benevolent view of the current nation-state and idealizes the applica-

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<sup>10</sup> Erickson expands on Foucault’s notion of bio-power as the cooperation of two regimes of power: “First disciplinary power focused upon the control of individual bodies, increasing capabilities to fuel efficiency, aligning mechanic repetitions towards efficiency. Second was a politics that focused upon the control of populations, what Foucault described as the “species body.” The regulatory controls of the population focused upon the reproduction of life, the control of birth and death in the larger realm of society.” (Erickson, 2010, p.479) This notion of bio-power can be read through the genocide of the Bison and the implementation of the Residential School system in Canada.

tion and vision of the current policy of multiculturalism...Second, and perhaps more deleterious, is the way such a view of history establishes a certain nation subject as the natural outcome of the land of the nation, as it was explored by the canoe" (Erickson, 2010, p.485). As Himani Bannerji points out in her critique of multiculturalism, "this discourse of diversity is a fusion of a cultural classification, or an empirical/



**Figure 21.** *A man, his dog and his canoe.* Medium Format photo/Digital Print 36"x44"

descriptive gesture, with politics. That is, our empirically being from various countries, with our particular looks, languages and cultures, has become an occasion for interpreting, constructing and ascribing differences with connotations of power relations" (Bannerji, 2000, p.35). This then is the paradox of Canada's multicultural policy; it is actually born out of the Naturalist tradition and its legacy of cultural assimilation. Bannerji elaborates on this paradox by saying that "the concept of diversity simultaneously allows for an emptying out of actual social relations and suggests a concreteness of cultural description, and through this process obscures any understanding of difference as a construction of power" (2000, p.36). And so the continuing disavowal of contemporary Indigenous culture within mainstream contemporary art and culture and the likening of an artist's (or historical figure's) appropriation of shamanic ritual or identity as a "gift" from primitive culture in combination with the use of icons like the canoe as a symbolic gesture to tie oneself to the landscape, as a matter of course, enforces the connection to Canada's cultural and colonial history. For many Canadian historians, the canoe is also seen as a "gift" from the Aboriginal people to the European settlers. And as Erickson points out, because of this "gift" and with the canoe's history in opening up the land to European settlement, "the canoe has become the historical reason for the being of Canada" (2010, p.487). Subsequently, "the nation becomes, because of the exploration by canoe, a unique entity in a sea of countries and identities,



**Figure 22.** *The Deerhelper series, numbers 1 through 4.* Screen prints. Each 15"x22"

and the canoe is the guard that maintains the boundary of that identity” (p.487). Erickson goes on to further substantiate the uniqueness of the canoe as a symbol of Canadian identity by positioning the success of the canoe as a symbol of identity in relation to the success of colonization in Canada. “For even though canoe-like boats, in some form or another, have existed on all six inhabited continents (and were one of the earliest links between them), the canoe in Canada, according to the national myth, has achieved perfection, and has thus brought forth a nation to invoke its symbolic potential. Because it is the specific nation that flows out of this connection, it is important to make note that the perfect canoe is only made perfect by its ability to be incorporated into European expansion” (p. 487). This historical and contemporary success of ideas and material goods can, I think, be attributed to almost any cultural appropriation in Canadian history, but it remains vitally important to understand the history and cultural implications of that appropriation, for even if we have not moved into the utopic vision of Trudeau’s (post) modernist multicultural age (remember to picture Trudeau wearing a buckskin jacket and paddling a canoe when you read this), appropriation and cultural assimilation are still very much a part of the contemporary modern age.

As the authors of *Decolonising testimony: on the possibilities and limits of witnessing* write, “Canada is a nation in which the national memory of settlement [and] dispossession is still in dispute” (Kennedy, Bell and Emberley, 2009). It is therefore vitally important in this artist’s opinion to critically interrogate the contemporary Naturalist when he appears in Canada. As Mary Longman suggests in her essay on contemporary Aboriginal art, “the colonial strategy of



territorial take-over involves ‘direct-force’ and ideological force-termed ‘cultural imperialism’ by Edward Said (1974), which substitutes the Aboriginal narrative with European interpretation, creating a massive web of myth making” (2009, p.100). For an artist like myself who has grown up with and admired First Nations artists like Longman and Stimson, amongst others, I find it quite alarming to witness the complete white washing of the Aboriginal narrative in works like Coates’ shamanic rituals and in entire exhibitions like the Power Plant’s *Adaptation* exhibition. As Longman writes, “Aboriginal art that set out to reclaim their history...[through] themes of critical analysis of the colonial narrative and assertions of the Aboriginal perspective, such as themes that addressed colonization, stereotypes, cultural appropriation, identity, and the Western Art history [tradition of] framing and exclusion...serve[s] two primary purposes: to deconstruct the colonial narrative that has represented Aboriginal people and to rebuild and reclaim the Aboriginal narrative” (2009, p.100). For me, thinking of a future working ground and position from which to make work within this troubled legacy of the Canadian nation means making a serious investment in our history, myths and attributes in order to find ways to not only retell those stories but to also create new ones. I should add that I have focused so heavily in this paper on the need for the inclusion of the Indigenous narrative into the Canadian Wilderness discourse because it seems to me as though contemporary discourse in this country around the topics of Nature, Nation, and in particular Canadian Art, treats the Indigenous voice in one of two ways—either simply ignoring it, or as is more common, segregating the Indigenous under the subheading of postcolonial critique and as an ‘alternative’ voice talking back to a dominant white-settler history. But it is precisely this narrative that can answer my earlier question about the possibilities of an alternate grand narrative in Canada. If we begin to unsettle and destabilize the White Settler Invader Narrative that dominates the conversation around wilderness history in Canada, then perhaps we can change some of the issues that plague our nation today. As Matt James argues in his forthcoming essay *Settler-Invader Culture, Power, and the Terrain of Reconciliation: Neo-liberal Heritage Redress*, 2011, the insertion of the Indigenous Humanities and its various mythologies into this historical settler narrative is imperative to stop the “neoliberal project of re-making a public sphere devoid of critical dissent” (2011, p.69). He argues that in Canada there is currently a process of historical “normalization” that removes the past from the arena of contem-

porary political conflict and debate (James, p.20). In a neoliberalized Canada, the hot button topic of multiculturalism means “building a new interest intermediation process that excludes critical voices and perspectives” and creates a Canada where “the past becomes the requisite object of ‘correct’ observance and nothing more. In this sense...neoliberal heritage redress seeks rather to anaesthetize memory than to enrich it” (James, 2011, p.72).

I think future research in this area should also include a more in depth look at Canada’s multicultural policies, and in particular the current methods and directives from Parks Canada to actively include and recruit immigrant families into the governments park usage quotas. The in-



**Figure 23.** *Tent Trailer at Night.* Medium Format photo/Digital Print 36”x44”



**Figure 24.** *Tent Trailer in the Morning.* Medium Format photo/Digital Print 36”x44”

clusion of new voices in the park narrative, however they got there, has the potential to open up new possibilities and find new ground from which to view the Canadian landscape. Bruce Erickson speaks to this thinking through our failures to find new ground in two ways; first, “that means that we need to understand the connections between the theft of land performed by the slow and determined entry of the European into the landscape and the attempts to eliminate the First Nations presence on the land” (2010, p.493). Secondly, he says, “we would also do well to seriously consider the queer habitations of Canadian space and nation” (p.493). And it is with this consideration to contested territory that comes the added need to question the historical and socio-cultural construction of that same “Canadian space”. Again, this could be the topic of another research project altogether, but I will explore this idea very briefly as it pertains directly to the performance *The Beaver on the River* that I plan to do on the South Saskatchewan River,

where I will dress as *The Beaver* and spend time inhabiting the Saskatoon river space in a canoe. The ideas of ‘space’, ‘place’ and ‘non-place’ that come up in the discourse around architecture, urban planning, and land-use management are described by Marc Auge in his description of Supermodernity, as concepts that intertwine and tangle together (1995). Building from de Certeau, who described space as ‘a frequented place’, ‘an intersection of moving bodies’, he says it is the inhabitants and users of a place who transform it into a space. I would say most city dwellers have, as Auge says, developed a fictional relationship between gaze and the actual landscape. And while we use the word ‘space’ to describe the “frequentation of places which specifically define the journey”, we should still remember that there are spaces in which the individual feels himself to be a spectator without paying much attention to the spectacle. Thus the spectator becomes the spectacle. Clearly, as Auge describes it, the idea of a ‘non-place’ explores two complementary but distinct realities: “spaces formed in relation to certain ends (transport, transit, commerce, leisure) and the relations that individuals have with these spaces” (p.80). Auge further describes the notion of ‘non-place’ as the polar opposite to place (p.75): “the air, rail, motorway routes, the mobile cabins called ‘means of transport’ (aircraft, trains, and road vehicles), the airports and railway stations, hotel chains, leisure parks, large retail outlets, and finally the complex skein of cable and wireless networks that mobilize extraterrestrial space for the purpose of communication” are the real measure of our time (p. 79). And while this argument is a useful point of reference to begin thinking about the uses, designations and creation of public



**Figure 25.** *The Beaver at the River*: research photo.

spaces, those in Canada would do well to consider the counter argument born out of a (post) colonial discourse which calls into question the very idea of a ‘non-place’, as every space, and place, even the airports, shopping malls, and territory covered by pipelines, has a history, both present and future, which also needs to be recognized and understood.

In Saskatchewan these realities are mediated through various levels of government, conservation groups like the Meewasin Valley Authority in Saskatoon, cameras, planned events, bridge views, etc. For most of us, we only interact with the ‘space’ a river like the South Saskatchewan inhabits and are reminded of the archeological and geographical place that it is through this mediated interaction. It is interesting to note that to read a real place like the South Saskatchewan River, for example, through the works of European philosophers and theorists, as we are prone to do in Canada, creates a space for the river to become a *terrain vague*, as coined by another European, Ignasi de Sola-Morales Rubio (1995), in his writing on the mediated gaze of empty and abandoned spaces in cities. Because reading the river through European eyes, as an empty space, which most of the legacy of our city planning does, underlies the continuing colonialist strategies and perceptions of the functions and development of the river. So, much like the Western Development Museum in North Battleford, the South Saskatchewan River itself becomes the starting point for politics. Building once again on the writings of Catriona Sandilands, I will add that the domestic ideal for spaces like national parks is, in its more contemporary form, assimilationist, whereas the wilderness ideal is exclusively white (Sandilands, 2005). So even though Saskatchewan’s green space/ nature utopias and beacons of “official” and proud histories like the WDM and the Prince Albert National Park are supposed to be inclusive, the Naturalist/ Conservationist nature/history they represent is already stamped with colonial whiteness. This then, as I hope I have shown throughout this paper, becomes an interesting staging ground for someone like me to place my work, for Parks and Museums, as Sandilands notes, “serve a particular, historical, and embodied site for enactments of – and resistances to – these [Canadian] articulations of nature, gender, race, and nation” (2005, p.146).

For me, the idea to bring my “othered” nature-based characters into these realms, such as the river, museum, park or gallery, is a strategy of questioning the dominant and official histories present in such places. My aim, if I could call it that, is to put into doubt one of the founding principles within the colonial discourse of territorial take-over: the construction of a separation between the colonized and colonizing societies. This separation extends the power necessary to



represent and privilege certain ideologies. The culture-nature juxtaposition is part of this reality, which is in its essence, the triumph of culture over nature and the production of the “other” within nature. As Derek Gregory argues in his essay *(Post) Colonialism and the Production of Nature* (2003), this “other” often takes the form of an unfriendly or monstrous power that threatens the colonial culture. But this is an imaginative process, helped by the construction of nature as an external and eternal force lying outside the historical definitions of ‘culture’. Nature was therefore seen to be not only dominated, but also domesticated, and so examples of difference—the monsters, deformations, and especially Indigenous knowledge—were removed from European society either by time or physical distance (Gregory, 2003). Gregory builds on Edward Said’s concept of the ‘imaginative geographies’ as one of the enabling conditions and material effects of colonial rule. His writings show us how the European desire to ‘normalize’ and ‘naturalize’ nature was achieved in part through a spiral of representational practices and performances that eradicated difference and alternative histories. He warns us that “the imaginative geographies are never merely representations, they have practical, performative force” (p.107). And so it is with an eye to representational praxis and the resurgence of the Naturalist tradition in contemporary Canadian artistic and cultural practice, that I will close by saying that I truly believe that once you have attempted to learn the history of a place and its people, and imagine it, really imagine it, with yourself as a part of it, you will never again see it in the same way. My writing, my characters and especially my artworks represent this desire to understand this place and to challenge the representational history of the imaginative geographies of our colonial past and the notion of the “other” in Canada’s Nature/Nation discourse.

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## Installation and Performance Images

